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ABSTRACT

Noting that Indiana is poised to take active steps toward becoming a community of readers for its young adolescent citizens, this pamphlet discusses the foundations laid by the Middle Grades Reading Improvement program and plans for the Middle Grade Reading Network. The pamphlet discusses: how Indiana's schools have "failed" young adolescents; an "ideal" vision of a school and community that supports all adolescents to develop their full potential as readers; the breadth of activities of the 10 projects that comprise the Middle Grades Reading Improvement program; the role of the Middle Grades Reading Network in realizing the vision of building a community of readers. (RS)

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The Middle Grades Reading Network

Building a Community of Readers

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Building a Community of Readers

The Middle Grades Reading Network

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Reading:

How We Are Failing Indiana's Young Adolescents

A little over one-quarter of Indiana residents are under the age of 18. During the next decade, they will make the transition into the adult work world, seeking further education or jobs and undertaking the roles and responsibilities of parents and citizens. The character of their transition into adult life will be highly dependent upon their educational success, and their educational success rests solidly on their level of reading achievement.

Approximately three-fourths of these students will graduate from high school, leaving one-fourth behind in the dropout category--a category swollen with poor readers. Forty percent of the high school graduates will go on to post-secondary education, but only a third of that number will complete a bachelor's degree. Staying in school, dropping out of school, or going on for further education--these are decisions that many times are made, consciously or unconsciously, during the middle grades--between the 5th and the 9th grades. For most young adolescents, their choices will be predicated upon their level of reading achievement.

Since the importance of reading achievement and its crucial link to the middle-grades and, thus, future success is clear, it is surprising to learn how little focused attention is given to the reading opportunities and instruction that we provide 10- to 15-year-olds in Indiana. Consider these facts about reading instruction and resources for Indiana middle-grades students:[1]

- Today's middle-grades students have less time allotted to reading in the school curriculum than their counterparts of 50 years ago.
- Many students are not enrolled in reading or literature classes.
- Indiana ranks 32nd nationwide in textbook expenditures.
- Indiana schools spend, on the average, $1.92 per student per year on reading materials--less than the cost of one paperback.
- School libraries add only one-half book per student each year, meaning that most collections are outdated and inadequate.
- Many teachers receive no planned staff development in reading.
- Students have few opportunities to observe adult role models--teachers, parents, school administrators, or other adults--actually engaged in voluntary reading.
- Over one-quarter of Indiana middle-grades schools provide no special assistance to students who have fallen behind in reading achievement.
- Over one-third of students who have fallen one or more grade levels behind will receive no special help.
- Few schools make efforts to connect with parents, public libraries, or community agencies to extend young people's reading opportunities beyond the school day.

Young adolescents, delicately poised between childhood and adult responsibilities, are at a precarious time in their development. Those in whom we have cultivated an interest in reading and who possess strong reading skills will be willing and able to take advantage of the challenges and opportunities that school and community offer them. Those who have not developed a curiosity and excitement about the written word nor the skills to pursue more difficult reading tasks will face increasing pressure in and out of school that may well lead to a downward spiral in their self-esteem and lowered enthusiasm to perform when reading is required.

[1] Humphrey, Jack W., A Study of Reading in Indiana Middle, Junior, and Senior High Schools, Indiana Youth Institute, 1982.

The Vision:

Building Communities of Readers

In contrast to this grim picture, imagine a community that supports **all** young adolescents to develop to their full potential as readers. In a middle-grades school that has organized itself as a community of readers, the library is the hub of school activity. At any time during the school day, including before and after school and during lunch, you'll find students browsing for books or magazines, voluntarily reading for pleasure, working on assignments, or perhaps huddled in a corner reviewing a video or new compact disk. Poor readers and avid readers mingle: library use is a right, not a privilege based upon good habits or high grades. Bus schedules have been arranged so that **all** students will have access to the library regardless of how they come to school. Receptive and enthusiastic library staff know what young people want to read and how to encourage them to do so. They present new books to classes, individually counsel students on reading selections, and display materials in ways that catch young people's interest. They are also in close touch with classroom teachers, assisting them to obtain the materials they need for their curricula. The library is well stocked with materials of the kind that young adolescents want and need--materials that are up-to-date, appealing, and attractive.

In such a school, it would not be unusual to see paperbacks or magazines hanging out of a young person's back pocket, handbag, or locker. Nor would it be unusual to chance upon pairs or groups of students in the hallways involved in a spontaneous discussion about a

book they have just read. Passing adults join in the discussion, familiar with the books teens read and enjoy. From the principal to the custodian, no one in the school is immune to interest in books and reading.

The reading activity is not only in the hallway. Every student, every day, has time in class to read books of his or her choice--and so does the teacher. In a true community of readers, sustained silent reading is **not** a study hall, nor do students with poor reading skills simply turn pages in mute despair. Instead, teachers, who themselves are readers, ensure that students know how to select books and encourage responses to reading through individual conferences, student journals, and other appropriate measures.

Reading is a tool for inquiry in every subject area in the school. For instance, when students study about the medieval period, they comb the library for books and resources on the topic. Library materials complement and extend classroom collections. From this reading they develop topics of interest to study in greater depth. The individual or small-group reports on castles, heraldry, guilds, or other topics about this period all require further reading, writing, and rereading. In science, students write and read as they conduct experiments, seek new information on topics of study, and develop reports on their findings.

Messages about the enjoyment and usefulness of reading are embedded throughout the school environment and are amplified by special events that enliven the routine. These might include visits by local writers, regular trips to the public library, field trips that incorporate reading and writing opportunities, and wacky fun events of the kind young adolescents thrive upon: all-night read-a-thons in the school gym, reading graffiti boards in the halls, and reading awards of various sorts. In this way, readers, not just athletes, gain recognition in school.

Staff throughout the school receive training to help them understand and address the reading needs of young adolescents and the best ways to meet these needs. In doing so, they are encouraged to expand their own reading. They participate in adult reading groups or serve on selection committees for young adult books. They learn about the books that appeal to young people, how to promote books, how to engage young people with them, and how to use books as a tool for inquiry about important issues of personal and social concern to us all.

In a community of readers, young adolescents are presented with meaningful reading experiences, not only in school but also in the out-of-school hours. The public library plays a crucial role. Rather than treating young people as pariahs without baby-sitters, 10- to 15-year-olds are welcomed into the library and provided with their own space, collections, and activities. Young adult programming offers young people opportunities to have fun with friends as they expand their literacy horizons. Librarians trained to assist young adults help them to deepen their knowledge of the library's resources, cultivating the library's future adult patrons and donors in the process.

Support for making the community truly a community of readers for **all** young adolescents comes from everyone. Parents enter the circle through school events. Simply making sure that television is not on all evening and that there is a quiet, comfortable place for their children to read are the first steps. They may also participate in programs that introduce them to young adult books and help them to understand how they can talk to their children about the reading they are doing.

A community of readers includes a large supporting cast, from the youth worker and youth minister to the Girl Scout or 4-H leader. Youth activities provide many meaningful literacy opportunities,

from brainstorming lists of materials for a camping trip to reading to the elderly or presenting a play. There are roles for business people, media, and local government. Businesses and other community offices often serve as sites for young people's hands-on learning or career education. As they observe adults at work, they learn about the ways literacy serves adults. Business, media, and government leaders also control purse strings and policies that can promote or hinder youths' literacy learning. Young adolescents need reading mentors, supporters, and advocates of all kinds and at all levels.

In short, a community of readers provides young adolescents with:

- Reading role models.
- Active engagement with books and other reading materials.
- Educators and youth-serving professionals who have had professional development about youth literacy.
- Effective reading instruction.
- Activities to meet the needs of poorer readers.
- Reading supported throughout the school environment.
- Reading opportunities in the after-school hours and during the summer.
- Parents who are encouraged to attend to their young adolescents' reading needs.
- Schools, families, youth agencies, and public libraries that work together closely.

A Foundation to Build On

The ideals on the previous page are not "pie in the sky": they are unquestionably achievable, as a number of Indiana communities have demonstrated over the last several years. In 1989 Lilly Endowment Inc. began a concentrated focus to address the unmet reading needs of Indiana's young adolescents through a comprehensive grant-making program titled The Middle Grades Reading Improvement Program. Ten major projects were undertaken: Books for Rural Youth Access, Building Comprehensive Literacy Learning Supports, Marketing Reading in Indiana, Opening Doors, Parents Sharing Books, REAP (Reading Excitement and Paperbacks), Reading for Real, SOAR (Stimulating Opportunities for Adolescents to Read), Student-Operated Paperback Bookshops, and Teachers Under Cover. The Endowment also sponsored conferences, provided technical assistance, and made provision for evaluation of the projects. In addition to these projects, starting in 1992, a number of Indiana middle-grades schools received minigrants of $5,000 to undertake a variety of reading improvement projects. Special efforts were made to target the 53 Indiana school corporations with the greatest number of disadvantaged youth, ensuring that the impact would be felt by those with the greatest need.

The breadth of the activities and the numbers of people involved are truly astounding. For instance:

- 7.7 million people in 1990 and 5 million in 1991 were reached through a media campaign involving television, radio, and billboards.
- 68 student-operated school bookshops were established.
- 68 groups of parents were trained and encouraged to share books with their young adolescents.
- 33 teams, consisting of teachers and school and public librarians, developed community projects to encourage young adolescents to read.
- 66 Teachers Under Cover book discussion groups were established.
- 89 schools and 6 community agencies received new paperback book collections and developed voluntary reading programs.
- 238 public library systems provided special activities and collections for young adolescents.
- Hundreds of teachers were trained in new literature teaching techniques.

In schools and communities across the state, numerous small steps were taken toward the goal of becoming communities of readers. What we learned from these efforts prepared us for the future: **The Middle Grades Reading Network.**

Building Communities of Readers in Indiana

The Role of the Middle Grades Reading Network in Realizing the Vision

The Middle Grades Reading Network, located at the University of Evansville, builds upon the foundation laid by The Middle Grades Reading Improvement Program, extending and enriching those beginnings. Our ultimate goal is to make all of Indiana a community of readers, supporting the reading development of each and every 10- to 15-year-old in the state. Four major activities are planned toward meeting this goal:

- Development of six Community of Readers demonstration sites.
- Encouragement and support to other Indiana communities to become communities of readers.
- Development of a statewide stakeholders group committed to addressing the literacy needs of Indiana youth.
- Dissemination of *what works*.

First, to demonstrate how local communities can become communities of readers that provide young adolescents with meaningful reading opportunities from morning until night, we are supporting the

development of six Community of Readers demonstration sites. At these selected sites, schools will undertake a careful examination of young people's reading needs, desires, and opportunities at the school and in the community. Building on this information, each site will develop a plan that addresses concerns and moves them toward becoming a true community of readers. During the planning and implementation of the project, all sites will have the opportunity to work with experienced consultants. The sites are located in rural and urban settings and represent a range of conditions Indiana educators might face. Each Community of Readers site is different, reflecting the unique strengths and needs of each area.

Second, we will encourage and support Indiana communities to become communities of readers through a minigrants program focusing on the state's 140 middle-grades schools with the greatest numbers of disadvantaged youth. We offer two opportunities for schools in this target group to apply for $5,000 grants aimed at meeting selected goals for building communities of readers. Grantees are honored at statewide recognition dinners, and information about their projects is featured in the Network newsletter, as well as disseminated to local media.

Third, in order to develop broad public awareness of the reading needs of young adolescents and the importance of full community attention to these needs, we have developed a group of statewide stakeholders. This group--drawn from education, community service, business, and policy arenas--works together to shape an action plan to make all of Indiana a community of readers for young adolescents. Stakeholders are forceful advocates with strong interest in the welfare of young adolescents. Their goals are to tackle the logistical barriers that stand in the way of Indiana's becoming a community of readers

for young people. These barriers include lack of funding, problems with curricular organization, school structure, and community awareness. Our model for the stakeholder's effort is the highly successful Pennsylvania Children's Literacy Council. This initiative was facilitated by a nationally known consultant, who is assisting us to develop a similar group to advocate for young people's reading needs in Indiana. Stakeholder task-force committees address the charges laid out in the plan generated by the stakeholders.

Fourth, we are widely disseminating what we learn about what works. Three important means at our disposal are the Network newsletter *NetWords*, a practitioners' journal, and a video presentation. The Network newsletter is distributed free of charge during the school year to all project participants. It reports on Network happenings, provides timely information on upcoming deadlines and learning opportunities, and shares resources and ideas on what works. In contrast to the newsy format of the Network newsletter, the practitioners' journal provides opportunities for in-depth articles on good practices emerging from the different projects. Seeking to encourage teachers and others, who may not have considered writing about the topics that they are best informed about, we sponsor a series of hands-on journalism workshops for potential contributors. These three one-day workshops, led by an expert consultant, are held in conjunction with the Indiana State Reading Association meetings. Finally, through a half-hour video documentary, we will share the work going on across the state. The video will feature the demonstration sites, minigrant projects, stakeholders' work, and other activities of the Network. Copies of the tape will be distributed to all Indiana Public Broadcasting stations, our target schools, numerous public and university libraries, and other organizations with a stake in helping young people.

Conclusion

Indiana is poised to take active steps toward becoming a community of readers for its young adolescent citizens. Since 1989, Hoosiers have been exposed to an influx of new ideas about young adolescents' reading needs. In communities across the state, seeds were planted in the form of the many reading projects fostered by Lilly Endowment Inc.'s Middle Grades Reading Improvement Program. As a result, many young people, who might not otherwise have done so, became excited about reading. They ran bookshops, participated in all-night read-a-thons, filled graffiti walls with messages about their favorite books, and engaged in serious reflective talk about books with powerful moral and emotional messages. As this occurred, many new books poured into selected school libraries, teachers began their own reading groups, and school teams made new connections with local public librarians.

This activity and reflection prepared the ground, sowing the seeds of anticipation which the Middle Grades Reading Network stands ready to reap. We will work to spread our message about the importance of making Indiana a community of readers for all young adolescents. Our work will be multilayered and crosscutting--from the six intensely cultivated demonstration sites and the schools that will receive minigrants to the numerous other individuals, schools, and organizations that will be drawn into the circle through the stakeholders' work or our dissemination efforts.

Young adolescents will form the communities of the future. In no more than a few brief years, they will be parents, teachers, and leaders. To be successful adults, they must be prepared. Reading, in its broadest possible sense, from the most mundane to the most imaginative purposes, is one of the most critical skills they can obtain. They must not only be proficient readers, but they must be lifelong readers who will, in their turn, pass on the skills and pleasure that reading can bring to the next generation. Making Indiana a community of readers is a proposition for today--and for tomorrow.

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